XI. ART

531 171 The art of the Malagasy, although nowhere very rich or varied, is pure art, in the sense that it is inspired entirely by aesthetic considerations. Aside from a few naturalistic carvings used as memorials to the dead, for magical purposes, or as decorations on containers for charms, their art products seem to have no religious or magical connotations. Even the Sihanaka, who have developed and named a variety of elaborate mat designs, claim that the purpose of such designs is purely decorative. In most tribes the designs are not named and no significance is attached to them.

Some tribes even go a step further in aesthetic expression and make art objects which serve no utilitarian purpose. Thus the Bakalava manufacture small baskets of fantastic shapes, mats and fans embroidered with raffia, etc., which are never used, but which hang on the walls of the dwellings much like pictures in our own houses. The tribes of the far south take delight in elaborately decorated baskets and keep many empty ones standing on their shelves. The Sihanaka weave amusing figures of men and animals from papyrus and carve small paddles which the men carry as a part of full dress, like swagger sticks. The Bara even carve small images of men and animals which are pure bric-a-brac and take delight in deliberate caricatures, especially of unpopular white officials.

517 581 In contrast with these art loving tribes, the Tanala, with the single exception of the Zafimaniry gens, seem to have very little aesthetic sense. The little that they have expresses itself in good craftsmanship rather than decoration. Their houses, although well built and neatly kept, are severely plain. Their tools and utensils are simple in form and devoid of ornament. Cloth, where woven, is decorated with plain stripes and even their mats and baskets are, for the most part, undecorated. Only wood carving shows any development, and that only among the Zafimaniry.

322 531 Until about twenty years ago the only Tanala who did any wood carving were the Zafimaniry gens of the Menabe. Individuals in other gentes sometimes scratched zigzag lines on the handles of ladles and cut the handles of their spoons into ornamental outlines (Fig. 7, a, b) but such decoration was exceptional. In recent years there has been an increase in wood carving. At present there are a few semi-professional carvers among the Ikongo. These men have learned the art from the Bara. Their work consists, for the most

L. Lenox E-5 (1925-27) 1933 970 Tanala 710

522 incisions, with some of the wood cut away. When wood is removed,
531 the knife cuts are rectangular in section, with flat bottoms and straight sides.

Deep cuts are made with the chisel or, rarely, the knife. They are commonly in the form of small triangles, as in European chip carving. In making these cuts, the chisel is pressed into the wood vertically on two sides of the triangle and a chip removed by a sloping cut from the third side. The bottom of the cut thus slopes downward from the base of the triangle to its apex. The triangles are always intended to be equilateral. Crescents, ovals and circles are also deeply cut. In these figures, one side of the cut is always vertical and the other sloping. In circles it seems to be a common practice to cut away the interior in such a way as to leave a series of ridges radiating from the center to the circumference.

527 The Tanala have no appreciation of the aesthetic value of plain
534 surfaces. The whole of a decorated object will be covered with carving and no large unserved spaces are left even within designs. This tendency to over-elaboration is carried so far that in curved figures of any size the wide, sloping side of the cut is usually fluted with shallow parallel lines. In arranging the designs, the surface to be decorated is treated as a whole or, if very large, it is divided into a few balanced panels. Unity is maintained by the use of borders. Within the border, the surface is divided into smaller sections of balanced arrangement or, if the main design is curvilinear, it may be treated as a unit. If the area within the border is treated in several sections, these are usually divided off by bands of different design. The designs in each section are selected with regard to the whole pattern, so that good balance is maintained.

The designs are built up by the combination of a few simple elements. Those of most frequent occurrence are various combinations of parallel straight lines including simple parallel lines, arranged either horizontally, vertically or diagonally with regard to the design unit, cross hatching and herringbone patterns. These elements are used mainly in borders and bands between sections of design, but may also be used to fill details of large designs.

Almost as frequent as the parallel line combinations is a series of motifs built up from combinations of small triangles. These include simple toothed lines, zigzags, X-shaped figures and diamonds. These motifs are usually used in bands and borders, but the X figures and diamonds are sometimes employed for fill.